The Power of Social Movements

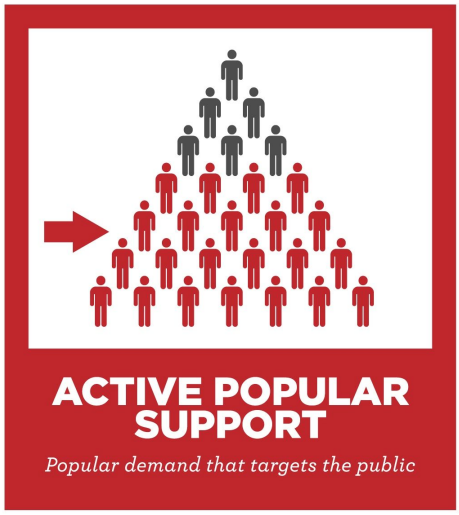
2006 Immigrant Rights Marches

We believe social movements are necessary for people to realize their own power and achieve justice. Social movements have ushered in some of the most significant historical shifts: the French Revolution created the nation-state as we know it; slavery abolitionists made slavery unthinkable; women's suffrage transformed women from property to citizens; and anti-colonial independence movements won self-determination and sovereignty for people of the Global South after decades of domination. Social movements channel grief and frustration into structural and cultural change that lasts.

Most of us can recall a moment in our lives when a popular movement seemed to capture a whole society's attention. But how does that happen? What makes social movements possible? How are they born and how do they die?

In this section, we hope to illustrate the power of social movements, list the key ingredients that make them possible, and offer a model for creating our own movements.

Active Popular Support

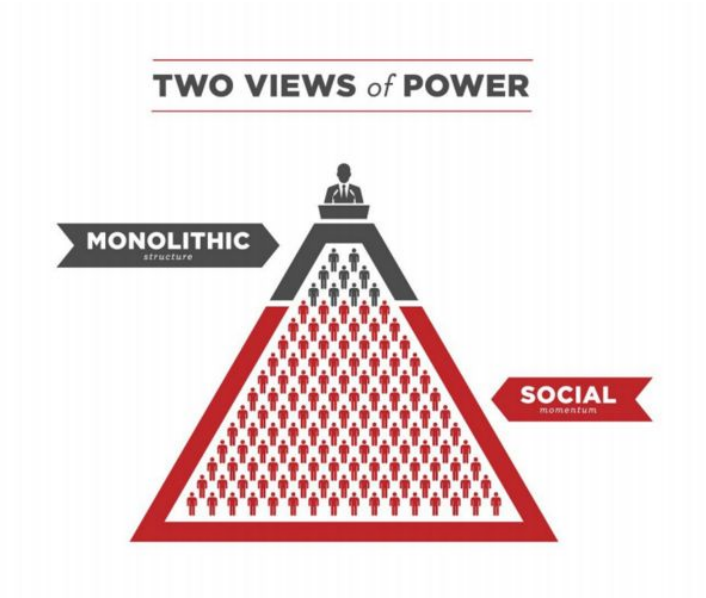


When do movements succeed?

We all know those powerful moments when movements have changed the world: the passage of the Voting Rights Act, the fall of South African apartheid, the end of colonialism in Africa & South America. But how did they get there? We are often told that change came about because elected leaders made new laws or agreements on our behalf. In fact, history shows that leaders follow the will of the people: they operate with the tacit consent of the people, and when those people withdraw their consent and stop cooperating with the status quo, history changes course.

We believe, along with scholars like Erica Chenoweth and Frances Fox Piven, that movements succeed when they gain a critical mass of active popular support: people taking action by voting, marching, persuading, donating, and generally non-cooperating with the status quo. The goal is to get as many people as possible participating (in as many ways as are available) to support the movement. Once there is a critical mass of active popular support (in Chenoweth's studies of dictatorships, at least 3.5% of the population), big pillars of the status quo fall and the ruling class has no choice but to follow the will of the movement.

Social vs. Monolithic Power

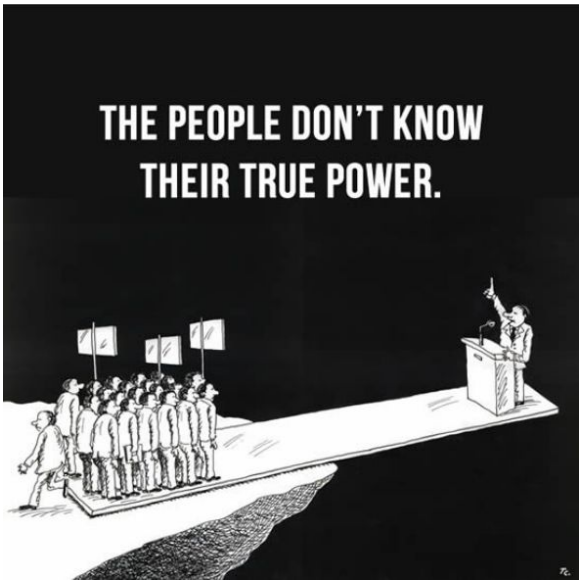


Do people really have any power?

This is at the heart of organizing and movement building. Do the "people" have power or do the "authorities" have it? How we answer that question will determine whom we organize, how we organize, and whether we win.

Many of us have been raised in cultures that teach us that power lies in the hands of the appointed few. We understand this to be a monolithic view of power-- a view that assigns power to the top of the pyramid.

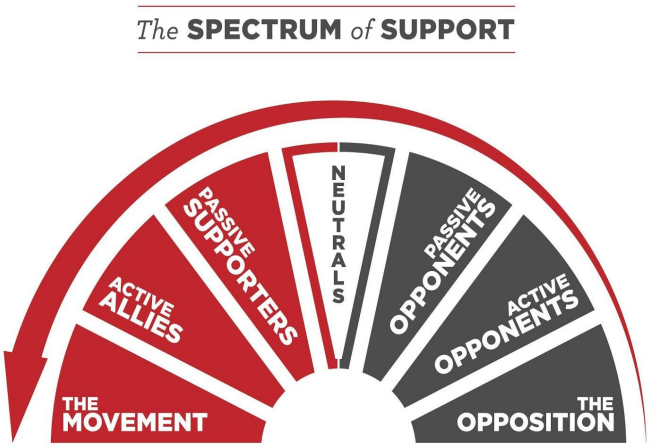
Alternatively, there is a belief that all leaders rely on the tacit consent of the people they rule over. For instance, the boss relies on the tacit consent of the workers to work; if the workers don't show up, the boss' power is empty -- he rules over no one. Collectively, our consent keeps certain institutions or "pillars" of society in place. If people were to collectively withdraw their consent, the pillars would fall and it would be clear that ordinary people actually have the power. We call this a social view of power.



While many of us became organizers and activists because we saw the world through a social view of power, our campaigns and movements have frequently organized themselves around decision-makers at the top. (Structure-based organizing, for instance, traditionally leverages the base in order to push decision-makers to agree to incremental reforms.) Our strategies and structures have sometimes reinforced a monolithic view of power.

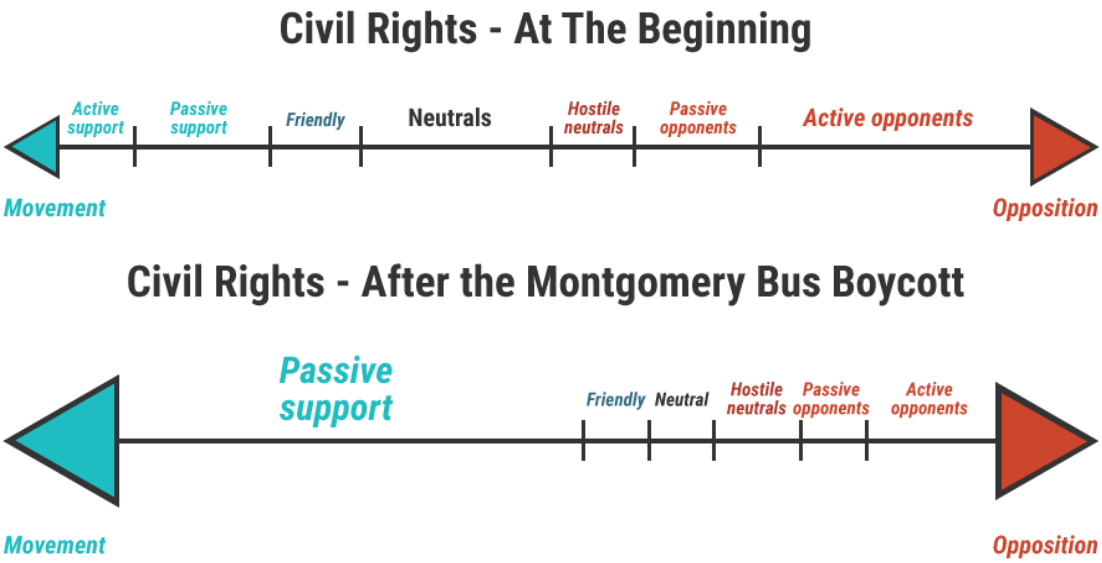
A social view of power requires more than a small base turning out at an action: it requires sustained mass participation. It means building our movements to activate the public and meet their needs at a higher level than the status quo.

Spectrum of Support



If we know that people have the power, and that we need as many as possible to join the movement and withdraw their consent from the institutions upholding the status quo, we need to be able to assess where the public stands on a given issue.

The spectrum of support is an excellent tool to breakdown the public's position on an issue or movement. Below you can see how the public shifted from the beginning of the Civil Right movement to its first victory.

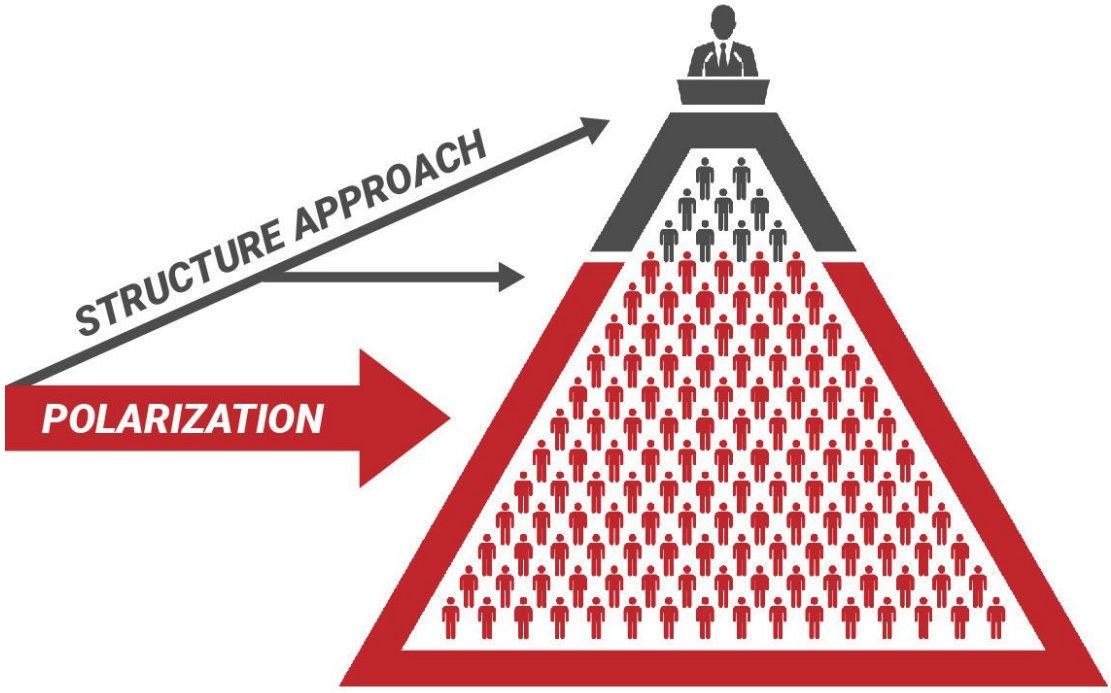


We know we are winning when we increasing active and passive popular support. These are the metrics of a movement's success. The spectrum of support allows us to map this.

Polarization

How do we move the public?

Polarization is the practice of asking the public, "Which side are you on?" Through actions -- small, symbolic action as well as mass civil disobedience -- we dramatize the crisis in the public eye, creating new awareness of our issue and new opportunities for people to join our movement. We force people to choose a side and choose between the world as it is and the world as it should be. These actions -- if they are effectively targeting the public and aiming to increase active popular support -- will pull the public toward our movement. Inevitably, when our movement grows, the opposition will grow, too: that's how polarization works. The active opposition may react by becoming violent, isolating themselves further from the general public. The Westboro Baptist Church, for instance, emerged in the context of the gay liberation movement in the early 1990s; the Church's anti-gay protests emboldened its homophobic members but alienated them from the general public.



Symbolic vs. Instrumental Demands

What moves people?

Symbolic and instrumental demands can be understood best by their relationship to their audience.

Instrumental demands are generally oriented toward decision-makers of dominant institutions. In general, they are specific and winnable within the political climate of the moment. For instance, an instrumental demand might be a legislative or policy change -- such as body cams for cops, closing corporate tax loopholes, or increasing state budget line items. The public may not know about or intuitively understand instrumental demands -- organizers might have to explain what "earned sick time" is and why it matters -- but when those demands are won they bring concrete change to people's lives and are often seen by organizers as one step on a long path to justice. Instrumental demands are often unpopular in the sense that they do not immediately galvanize people to action.

Symbolic demands are oriented to the broader public, and are intended to convey big picture, big story ideas. They aim to galvanize people to action and appeal to popular convictions and desires: desegregation, no more deportations, and living wages. They may take many years to win, but they mobilize many people in the process-- this mobilization and a shift in the common sense are the real victories. Symbolic demands are just a way to get there. Symbolic demands can often be popular demands.

More important are understanding whether demands are popular or unpopular.

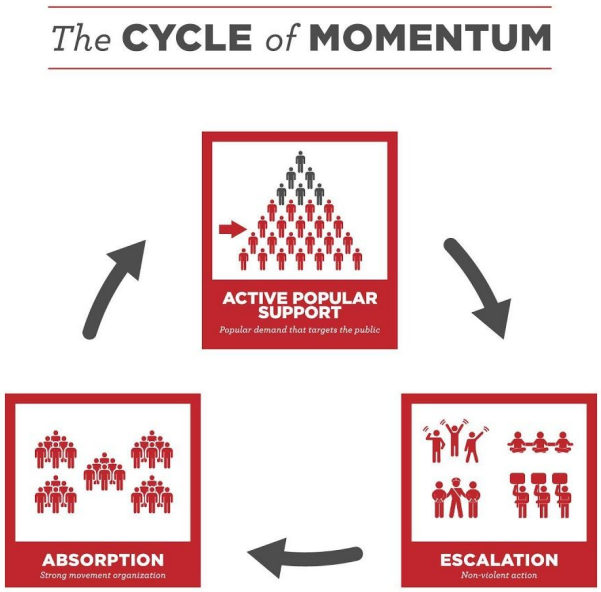
Unpopular demands: Demands that do not resonate with your public - either because the public doesn't know what they mean or the demands are alienating.

Popular demands: Demands that are deeply and/or widely felt by the public. They often dramatize a social problem and the language is accessible to your public. They speak to people's experiences, values, hopes, and/or fears.

Sometimes we see demands that are both instrumental and symbolic - which makes them popular in their appeal: this happens when campaigns or movements "make a mountain out of a molehill," turning a particular issue into the symbol of a larger whole. The Keystone XL pipeline was an instrumental demand of the climate justice movement that became a symbol of the extractive economy - and thus galvanized support around the issue and spoke widely to the public. The instrumental demand to indict officers who kill unarmed black folks is also a symbolic demand for a justice system that holds its own officers accountable. The Fight for $15

is an example of an instrumental increase to the minimum wage & a symbolic demand for a living wage, and through years of organizing has become a popular demand for a fair economy.

The Cycle of Momentum



Introduction

We use the cycle of momentum to build active and passive popular support through escalation and absorption over time. The process of building popular support requires the constant cyclical creation of momentum, which can be achieved through regular and strategic escalation led by decentralized movement teams. New participants are absorbed through actions and then set up in teams through mass training. The cumulative goal is to create enough momentum in the public to win the symbolic and instrumental demands of the movement. One of the most powerful demonstrations of cumulative momentum can be found in the 17 days of action in Egypt.

Each step of this cycle is crucial and it is important for movement activists to understand that momentum does not build linearly or exponentially but rather cyclically. If activists are prepared for a drop in momentum, and see it as an opportunity for absorption and preparation (which will enhance capacity to build more momentum), then we can avoid discouragement that can destroy our movements.

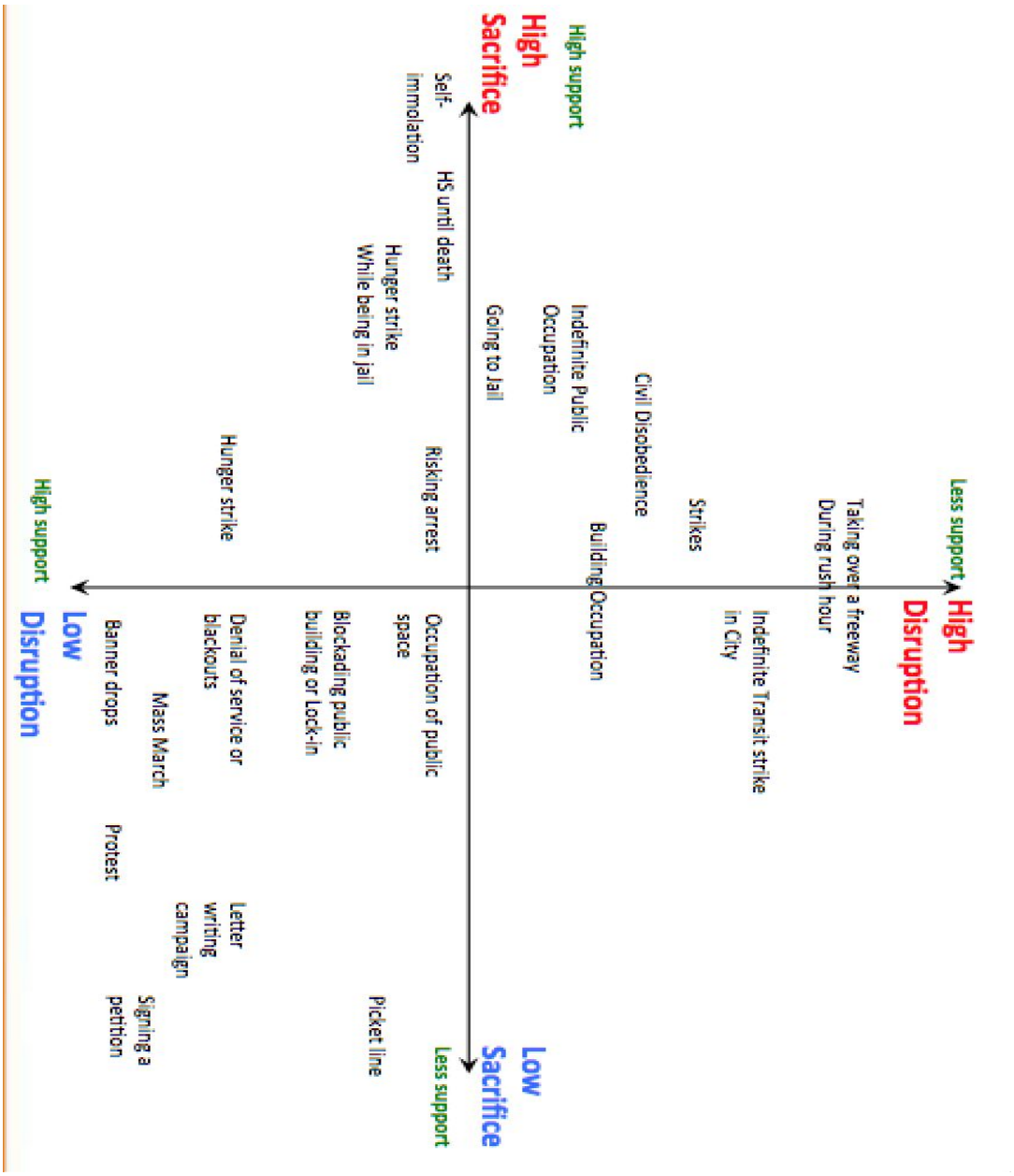
Escalation

March on the Edmund Pettus Bridge, 1965

Escalation is measured by sacrifice and disruption (increased sacrifice + increased disruption = escalation). The function of escalation in the cycle of momentum is to force the public to take notice of your issue and take a stance on that issue. It drives a wedge into the spectrum of support by asking: which side are you on? Ultimately, escalation is geared to push more and more of the public to choose the side of the movement. For example, the Civil Rights Movement's march on the Edmund Pettus Bridge was designed to show the public the brutality of the police and the repressive Southern power structure bent on disenfranchising African-Americans. The march--which took great amounts of personal sacrifice from the marchers and which was highly disruptive to Selma's status quo-- effectively forced the national public to pick a side: the marchers' or the violent repressors'. The art of escalation is critical to the success of the movement, since escalation is the primary dramatic interaction with the public.

The graph on the next page shows where some tactics of nonviolent resistance fall in a matrix of disruption and sacrifice.

Why sacrifice and disruption? Because sacrifices brings moral authority to the movement, while disruption causes a stir. This looks like significantly disrupting daily life for a significant amount of time.


High support
High Sacrifice
Low Sacrifice
High support
Low Disruption
Less support
High Disruption
Less support
Self-immolation
HS until death
Hunger strike While being in jail
Going to Jail
Indefinite Public Occupation
Civil Disobedience
Building Occupation
Strikes
Taking over a freeway During rush hour
Indefinite Transit strike in City
Hunger strike
Risking arrest
Denial of service or blackouts
Blockading public building or Lock-in
Occupation of public space
Mass March
Banner drops
Protest
Letter writing campaign
Signing a petition
Picket line

Trigger Events

Marches and actions in Ferguson after the shooting of Mike Brown in 2014

Trigger events are the opportune moments of escalation for the movement. They can be completely outside the control or influence of the movement (as with the police murder of Mike Brown in Ferguson) or they can be completely created by the movement (Occupy Wall Street's Days of Action, Gandhi's Salt March, etc.). A trigger event is an opportunity to amplify the demands of the movement through escalation. It is important to understand that strategic preparation for trigger events outside of the movement's influence and strategic coordination of trigger events entirely within the control of the movement are both essential to building enough momentum to win.

Can you think of any examples from your own experience of Trigger Events outside the influence of the movement and those created entirely by the leadership of movements?

Absorption and Moments of the Whirlwind

Sanctuary Campus student walkouts, 2016

While groups of people may escalate occasionally in their campaigns, building popular support for a movement requires sustained momentum over time-- in other words, multiple cycles of strategic escalation. To generate these cycles, you need a plan to absorb increasing numbers of people into the movement and to train them to escalate on a regular basis. Without a plan, campaigns and movements will experience a bottleneck during trigger events or moments of the whirlwind; if you don't create doors to enter the movement, people will have no way in. And if people have no way in, the movement -- your active popular support -- isn't growing.

For Reflection: *How do you currently absorb new people in your organization or movement? What are the doors through which people can enter and become members? What would you do if 100 people were lined up outside your door tomorrow waiting to become members? What would you do if there were 1000?*

If you want to build a movement, you have to be prepared to capture energy and interest when it explodes. This means being able to hand over all the tools people need not only to attend a march, but also for each and every one of them to start planning actions and campaigns that are aligned with the movement's strategy, vision and principles. If you can do this, your movement's capacity for growth will be exponential: you will absorb the momentum, rather than watch it dissipate over time.

In most situations, you only have one opportunity to engage someone and get them involved, so absorption needs to cast a wide net. Email lists, petitions, online donations, and social media pages are all ways of collecting new names of people actively interested in your movement. But we believe that mass training, as the primary means of absorption, is the best tool to ensure popular movements can go to scale and deal with the complexity as they grow.

Mass Training

Absorption asks: how can people enter your movement?
Mass training asks: what do people need to know in order to join the movement and act in step with its goals and values?

The goals of mass training can be broken down into 3 priorities:

1) To build the capacity of the movement by absorbing new members and giving them roles
2) To disseminate the culture and strategy of the movement (its DNA)
3) To protect the DNA

A good mass training program will have an initiation training that gives new members the basic information (the movement's basic story, strategy, and structure) and skills (recruitment, action design, etc.) they need to act on behalf of the movement with both autonomy and unity. In addition, a mass training program will have advanced trainings where people can learn to take meet the movement's needs in greater depth (learning to become trainers, to plan and support large trigger events, to support online infrastructure, etc.).